



the empty bell

Henri Nouwen: The Person, the Priest and the Writer

An Excerpt from the introduction to
Henri Nouwen: Writings Selected with an Introduction by Robert A. Jonas.
Modern Spiritual Masters Series. New York: Orbis, 1998.
(reprint by written permission only)

A Personal Reflection

A white robe falls loosely over his body. Around his neck hangs a long, woven, multi-colored stole from Central America. Fr. Henri Nouwen is sitting on a chair, hunched over a long wooden table. His large hands reach forward to surround the glass chalice, half-full of red wine. With wide-open eyes, he looks around the room, and then down at the prayers in a large missal propped on the white linen of the altar. From time to time, during the Eucharistic prayer, Henri closes his eyes tightly as if trying to focus all his energies. Here in his own darkness, he wants a quiet moment with Jesus. Painfully aware of his own limitations, he has come here to plead for this community of seekers.

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. . . . By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

Over the years, the clear glass chalice has reflected the faces of many thousands who have come to hear the Word: handicapped people lying across bean-bag chairs, lay care-givers, Catholic priests and Protestant ministers, Latin American peasants, professors, middle class Catholics, wealthy philanthropists, seminary students, and United States Senators. They come to hear the Word, but also to be in the presence of the radiance that seems to stream from this man. They come because they hope to receive, into their own shadows of doubt, despair and hopelessness, a bit of his reflected, dancing light. And perhaps to discover their own. They come because this man, more than anyone else they know, seems not only to speak the Word, but actually to become it. Some say, when Henri Nouwen presides at a Eucharist, one not only hears, but sees the Word, right here, right now.

Since his death, the memories of some who heard him have no doubt faded. But for others, the memories have grown in power and significance. Emerging from the shock of Henri's death, many of us walked toward other friends who knew him. Like adolescents suddenly called into new responsibilities, we gathered in small groups, looked into each others' tear-filled eyes, and shared stories of what we'd seen and heard. Remember what he said? How he declared that we are the Beloved of God? Because of him, don't we find ourselves stepping out in faith more boldly? Because of him, don't we find ourselves taking extraordinary risks to love or help others? Didn't our hearts burn in his presence? And even now, isn't he somehow here, among us?

Analogies to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus seem both presumptuous and appropriate. Henri's friends remember clearly his ordinary human weaknesses, especially the rapacious yearnings and temptations that assailed him from his own depths. We think about his many books--more than forty in all--in which he courageously stood with one foot in the shadow of self-rejection and one foot in the daylight of God's love. We know that he stood there for all of us, articulating so simply and beautifully what that wild, dangerous territory between the human and the divine looks like. Many of us would have preferred that Henri's human woundedness be less visible. But somehow, we know that his ever-present, accompanying shadow was only there because of the Light in which he walked.



One day, in September, 1996, a package arrived addressed to our six year-old son, Sam. Sam, a beginning reader, pronounced the name on the return address, “Henri J.M. Nouwen, Daybreak, L’Arche, Toronto, Canada.” With delight, Sam tore open the brown paper package to find a shiny gold penny whistle. Henri had sent it from an airport as he traveled from his community in Toronto to his beloved home-country of Holland. How like Henri, I thought, as Sam and I passed the whistle back and forth, enjoying its bell-like tones and simple melodies. Henri loved music, loved to send gifts to his friends, loved children, and loved to travel. I looked forward to telling him how the penny whistle had brightened our day.

I knew that Henri was on his way to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, to be filmed in a documentary focusing on one of its most famous paintings, Rembrandt’s “Return of the Prodigal Son.” In 1957, Henri had been ordained a Roman Catholic priest for the Archdiocese of Utrecht, Holland. Then, with the permission of his Dutch Bishop, he had made the world his parish for almost forty years. In that time, he had told the parable of the prodigal son to rich and poor alike, in middle class parishes, Roman Catholic and Protestant seminaries, Latin American barrios, Washington “think tanks”, evangelical churches, and in hundreds, perhaps thousands of small community gatherings all over the world. Henri was convinced that this parable was the center of gravity of Jewish and Christian Scripture, the heart of mystical teaching. He believed that the story of the prodigal son is somehow true for each one of us: even though we rebel, reject our birthright, and run off to faraway countries, our God will always welcome us back, embracing us with unconditional love. To each, to all, Henri offered the same glad message, the same good news, that you, and I, and we, are the Beloved of God. “My friends,” he would say, “I tell you that we are loved with a ‘first love’ even before we are born.”

On Tuesday evening, September 17, a few days after finding the penny whistle on our doorstep, I received a call from Kathy Christie, Henri’s secretary in Toronto. “I send greetings from Henri, and I have some bad news,” she said. “Henri had a heart attack in Amsterdam on Sunday night, just after arriving there from Toronto. He’s all right, but he’s in intensive care.”

I was shocked, but not surprised. Like many of his friends, I knew that he had been pushing himself too hard. Henri was supposed to meet the film crew for the Prodigal Son project in Amsterdam, and then fly with them to St. Petersburg. But after the flight from Canada, he was exhausted, and lay down for a nap. Suddenly awakening with pain in his chest, he called the hotel desk and was whisked by ambulance to the intensive care unit of a small teaching hospital nearby. On Monday and Tuesday, Henri endured much pain in his chest and back. His father, brothers, and sister rushed to his bedside, and by Tuesday afternoon, his friend, Nathan Ball, director of the Daybreak community in Toronto, had arrived.

Kathy added, “Right now, the doctors are saying that this was not a serious attack, but that Henri will need plenty of time to recuperate.” I asked her to tell Henri that I would make arrangements to visit him in the next few days.

On Wednesday morning, I called Northwest Airlines to arrange for a flight to Holland. Feeling sad, and a little desperate, I was reassured by the pleasant voice of the ticket agent. Yes, she said, I could be in Amsterdam within 24 hours. As she conveyed the flight information to me, she paused, “Just a minute please. I’ll need to put you on hold.”

As bland, elevator music poured into my ear, I saw Henri in airports all over the world, pulling his suitcase-on-wheels, nervously searching for his gate. Suddenly, the kind woman was back.

“I’m sorry,” she offered, “But our office is really buzzing right now. We’ve just had an announcement that a man had a heart attack while on board one of our flights. A Northwest flight attendant did CPR and the man started breathing again. We think he’ll be OK.”

The woman’s dramatic story seemed to create an unusual bridge between us, so I told her about my friend Henri, how he too had just suffered a heart attack. When I mentioned his being a Catholic priest and writer, she paused and said, “Hmm. This sounds familiar. How do you spell his first name?”

“Henri with an ‘i’, and Nouwen, N-o-u-w-e-n,” I said.

“You’re kidding”, she exclaimed, “I think I’m reading a book by him right now! I can’t really tell, because the cover is torn off, but I’ve been reading these little reflections for about a year. One in particular, called “Come to Me.” Isn’t this remarkable? Yes, I remember. Isn’t he the man who went to live with some unusual people?”

“The handicapped of L’Arche,” I replied, “In France, and then at their Daybreak community in Toronto.”

“Yes,” she said. “He was a university professor, but left to work with the handicapped. Please tell him that his writings have helped me so much! I can’t believe it. This little dog-eared book has been with me through a lot. It’s saved my life. Will you thank him for me?. Fr. Nouwen’s writings have come up at our parish prayer group. Please tell him that we will put him on our prayer list.”

Before hanging up, I learned that my ticket agent, Henri’s anonymous friend, was Liz Solano, sitting at a desk in Detroit, Michigan. But I could have been talking with any one of thousands of people, from all over America and Europe, who had been blessed by Henri’s inspiring and comforting words.

Henri and I spoke by phone later in the week. Feeling assured that the doctor’s diagnosis of a “slight” heart attack was accurate, Henri asked that I meet him in Toronto the following week rather than fly to Holland now. He said that he would be able to resume his normal activities within a few months.

We agreed to talk again in two days, and I hung up. Tears came easily, but I was also a little angry at the doctors for not ordering Henri to slow down. Like all Henri’s close friends, I knew that his periodic collapse into physical and nervous exhaustion was caused to some extent by his frenetic, emotionally intense 18-hour work days. From the moment he awoke in the morning until he fell into bed at night, his mind raced ahead toward the Kingdom of Heaven, toward the question of how he could help to make that Kingdom real for himself and others, especially the poor and oppressed. As Henri lay in the hospital, hovering near death, I and many of his friends reflected on his importance in our lives.

I first heard Henri preach at Harvard University in 1983, just as I was finishing my doctorate there. He spoke about two ways to live--either in the House of Fear or in the House of Love. By this time I had already made a tentative decision to leave my Christian birthright behind for Buddhist meditation. But Henri’s passionate conviction that Jesus was immediately present, here and now, and that the House of Love was real, flooded my mind and heart. I had been born and raised Lutheran, converting to Roman Catholicism in my late 20’s under the guidance of a contemplative religious order called the Carmelites. But my Christian life had gradually stagnated at Harvard. Henri’s spiritual vision was so

inspiring, so compelling, I began to re-examine my lukewarm relationship with Christianity.

I continued training in Buddhist Insight meditation, but when Henri appeared again the following year for a public lecture at St. Paul's Church in Harvard Square, I and a few friends hurried there to find seats in the front row. I didn't agree with everything Henri said, but his extravagant presence and deep faith won me over. What he said was important to me, but even more fundamental was who he was as he said it. I watched him roam the hall, gesturing wildly with his large hands, sometimes closing his eyes in deep concentration, sometimes rocking forward on tiptoe in the exhilaration of an ecstatic vision that became more and more vivid to him, and to us, as he declared its reality. As a graduate student in psychology, I had been trained to criticize all grand theories of reality, to seek out and to deconstruct their unspoken assumptions, religious bias, or conceptual inconsistencies. But Henri invited me to another kind of knowledge, a knowledge that valued rational thinking and critical thought, but that also opened a door to deeper levels of understanding and commitment. His was a spirituality that integrated mind and heart. I realized that Henri was not just communicating a body of information (with which we could agree or disagree), but a way of being. I wanted to be set free from the complex web of fear and insecurity in which I lived, and, surprised by my own boldness, I walked up to Henri after his talk and asked him to be my spiritual director.

